



## Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS User Capacity and Your Yosemite Experience

When people hear the terms *user capacity* and *limits on use*, they immediately ask, “Is the National Park Service going to close the gates? Will I still be able to drive my car into Yosemite Valley? Will I be able to experience the recreational activities I have enjoyed for years?”

Yosemite is a special place and each person who comes to the park makes a unique connection. For some it is the solitude of the High Sierra. For others it is the community and traditions formed by returning to the same campsite year after year. There are also large numbers of folks who stay for only a few hours, enjoying the magnificent scenery before heading to their next travel destination. The National Park Service must take into account the enjoyment of ALL people—but not at the expense of allowing degradation of the very resources and quality experiences it is responsible for preserving.

The purpose of the Revised Merced River Plan is to protect and enhance the unique values of the Merced Wild and Scenic River by establishing a user capacity program that provides for appropriate recreational opportunities and visitor freedom. However, use levels must be managed to prevent damage to the very values that make the river worthy of the stringent protections under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

### What will the user capacity program mean for a visit to Yosemite?

In the short term, adoption of this plan is not expected to result in dramatic changes, as most of the limits established in the action alternatives are based on existing conditions. Many aspects of the user capacity program have been successfully in place for years, and the new specific measurable limits being added are based on existing facility and use levels, which are believed to be protective of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values. However, over the longer term, management actions may be required to keep conditions within the standards established in the monitoring program. This would likely result in some changes to better manage and control use in the river corridor, or to possibly redirect use within or outside of the corridor.

In the future, if visitation continues to grow, it could mean that the National Park Service must institute a reservation or permit system to keep use levels at the established standard. But this is only one type of solution in an entire spectrum of possible management actions outlined in the revised plan (see pages II-50 to II-52).

### Will the National Park Service close the gates if quotas are reached?

Turning people away from the park at entrance stations—or otherwise closing park entrances—is *not* a part of the preferred alternative in the Draft Revised Merced River Plan. This alternative’s intent is to closely monitor visitor experience and resource conditions in the river corridor and effectively respond to impacts with management actions that will protect and enhance the river’s unique values. If limits are reached on busy days in the summer, visitors might be directed to other areas of the park or to other less crowded portions of the river corridor. It is also expected that more responsive and timely communication with gateway communities, bus operators, and visitors who are in route to the park will help control the timing of people entering the Merced River corridor on the busiest days.

The elements outlined in the Draft Revised Merced River Plan would augment the park’s existing user capacity management practices. For years, the National Park Service has controlled visitation in Yosemite by managing occupancy at campsites and lodging facilities, using the Wilderness Trailhead Quota System, and attending parking and directing traffic at busy intersections. Some proposed management actions may require additional environmental review and public input before implementation, others may not.

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## How does the user capacity program work on the ground?

Establishing quotas on the numbers of people entering the river corridor is not enough to protect the river's unique values. In all of the action alternatives, a monitoring process grounded in science will be mobilized to better track the connection between levels of use and possible impacts to the river. If monitoring shows that impacts are occurring, park managers could choose from number of management actions. These actions would range from increasing education and awareness about impacts in a given area, to temporarily redirecting use away from areas where damage is occurring. The plan also lays out the decision-making process. Implementation of this type of system is designed to move away from broad restrictions on use and instead targets limits for specific types of activities based on the overall health of the Merced River's Outstandingly Remarkable Values.

To facilitate the on-the-ground protection of river values, all of the action alternatives propose a user capacity program that establishes what the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals calls "specific measurable limits on use." To achieve this, the plan enlists a system of indicators and standards, which is part of a process known as the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) program. **Indicators** identify those SPECIFIC qualities that serve as early warning signs to better highlight where too much use may be occurring. **Standards** are then established to set the bar—and MEASURE—when action should be taken to prevent or reverse impacts. If standards are being approached or exceeded, action must be taken to LIMIT the impacts caused by too much use.

These indicators and standards are specific, measurable, and reflect the kinds of visitor experience qualities and resource conditions expected in different segments of the corridor. Working in concert with the monitoring program, the National Park Service would be able to take more responsive action to protect values—including protecting the experience of visitors—in the river corridor. VERP allows the park to manage user capacity to protect resources, while providing for the greatest amount of visitor freedom—in terms of allowing visitors to access and enjoy the park in the manner that they choose.

## How is this system different from what the park is doing today?

In the past, the park resorted to temporary access restrictions on those days when traffic congestion in Yosemite Valley reached gridlock conditions. Not only is reactive implementation of these types of measures extremely inefficient and taxing on park staff, it also puts a damper on the experience of park visitors—some of whom may have driven hours only to be prevented from reaching their desired destination.

Under the preferred alternative (Alternative 2), implementation of the interim facility limits would require park management to plan ahead and control visitor use levels on peak days to ensure that parking demand does not exceed parking capacity. In the short term, this could be done by temporarily diverting visitors from certain areas during those hours when peak use could exceed the established parking capacity.

Other alternatives look at visitor quotas for river corridor segments or management zones within the segments. These alternatives also include an annual visitation cap. The visitor quotas would serve as the extreme upper limit for visitor use and would be enforced even if VERP monitoring indicated that areas could handle even higher levels of use. Conversely, use could be reduced from these quota levels, or further restricted in specific areas, if VERP monitoring were to show that too much use was occurring in certain areas and river values were being harmed.

Overall, implementation of the VERP user capacity program, along with other limits proposed under the action alternatives, is expected to improve the visitor experience in Yosemite National Park by managing use at a level that reduces traffic and parking congestion and crowding. Today, the visitation capacity targets established in the *General Management Plan* are only reached or exceeded on about 5 days per year. As a result, in the short term, restrictions are only likely to be in place on a relatively few peak days. By planning ahead for those busy periods, park managers can keep use levels in check. At the same time, systems would be developed to allow visitors to plan ahead to ensure their access to the park at the desired time.

## How will the National Park Service be held accountable?

The National Park Service is committed to maintaining the transparency of the VERP user capacity program in order to provide greater accountability and opportunities for public involvement. The Draft Revised Merced River Plan commits to quarterly updates and an annual report presenting the results of monitoring and other management actions. The first VERP public meeting was held in October 2004 and the National Park Service is preparing its annual VERP report (to be released in late February or early March) followed by another public meeting in April. Watch the park's web site ([www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning)) for meeting specifics and release of the 2004 VERP report.